



Strategies to Promote Third Grade Reading Performance in Virginia

September 12, 2011

BACKGROUND

Research has found that strong readers in the early elementary grades have an academic advantage while students who struggle early have difficulty succeeding in school. The research also indicates reading deficits should be addressed as soon as they are identified. Virginia took action on this issue with the 1997 Early Intervention Reading Initiative. Children in kindergarten through third grade are screened for reading difficulties using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) or an approved alternative assessment, and additional instruction is provided for students identified as having early reading problems. In fact, Virginia students perform relatively well compared to most other states—on a 2009 national test of student performance for fourth grade reading, only one state had a significantly higher average score than Virginia.

KEY FINDINGS

During this study, we analyzed data from the 2010 Standards of Learning (SOL) third grade reading tests, surveyed Virginia school divisions, and observed selected third grade classrooms. We noted the following:

- Economic status, disability status, and race have a considerable impact upon third grade SOL reading test scores. Although pass rates have increased substantially over the past decade, the Virginia Board of Education goal of a statewide 95 percent pass rate on this test may not be feasible.
- Key elements of a good reading program include having children work in small groups and providing them with differentiated instruction tailored to their individual needs. Students should be placed in these groups on the basis of data from reading assessments. A majority of Virginia school divisions report that they are using the key elements we identified.
- Teachers are most critical to an effective classroom reading program and benefit from ongoing professional development and support from literacy coaches, reading specialists, and additional staff to assist in the classroom.

SUMMARY OF SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS

- To help schools focus on the development of reading skills in third grade, SOL tests taken by third grade students should be limited to reading and math.
- The Department of Education should (1) track and assess whether changes made by school divisions to improve student reading in the early grades have had a positive effect and could be adopted by other school divisions; and (2) establish a definition and a credential/endorsement for literacy coaches to ensure they have adequate skills.
- School divisions should provide early elementary teachers with opportunities for quality training in reading instruction.
- Consideration could be given to providing (1) additional resources to the PALS office at the University of Virginia to assist Virginia school divisions in improving their early reading programs through additional professional development and mentoring, and (2) funding for literacy coaches to improve reading instruction.
- Because of the importance of laying a foundation in early literacy, particularly for at-risk children, current funding levels for the Virginia Preschool Initiative should be maintained and all eligible localities should participate in the program. Localities should also expand the availability of preschool to at-risk children.